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### *D.H. Lawrence around the World: South African Perspectives*

Edited by Jim Phelps and Nigel Bell (Echoing Green Press, 2007)

Its title gives little clue to how important this collection may well prove – and for reasons which go beyond the prime intentions of its hard-working editors, I feel. It's clear from the Introduction that they somewhat fondly hope to rekindle a Lawrence revival, a renewal of the kind of attention Lawrence commanded in the mid third of the twentieth century. In truth, this once staple writer's reputation has considerably diminished, and is probably due for some fair reassessment. But this isn't where the major interest in this collection of academic essays and some poems lies. In fact it may well appeal to readers who have no overriding interest in Lawrence as such, and I hope it reaches them. This importance is as much a matter of timing, as of anything else. Perhaps more than for any comparable writer, the past and present state of Lawrence teaching or non-teaching in this country defines a historic moment for university studies and culture generally, and this book helps us to understand it and its implications in as dramatic a way as anything could.

The first section of the book is a set of critical reminiscences by highly respected local and émigré university teachers, who each recount the history of their own and their departments' encounters

with Lawrence's works. There's an extra pleasure here in a communal demonstration of flexible, intelligent and articulate writing such as one easily despairs of finding these days. The best of them are unsparingly honest and informative, and give a unique and sometimes raw insight into departmental politics and fashions over the period – while by the way providing the natural context and setting for the rest of the book. Geoffrey Haresnape's contribution, say, should probably be read early on, for just this reason.

The reason why Lawrence, in particular, should be such a catalytic figure has as much to do with another 'L's' merits, as with his own. Acute readers will notice that the name Leavis figures almost as many times in these pages as does the novelist/poet's, and the story of Leavis's influence on the shaping of English Departments is the real subtext here. Though most advocated at Pietermaritzburg, Stellenbosch, and UNISA, and widely supported at UCT and Wits, it was for or against this influence that the whole subsequent history of 'Eng. Lit.' was measured from the 1950s onwards, and – for better or worse – Lawrence was co-opted as its figurehead.

The why's of this are complex, and differ somewhat from location to location – as the essays here reaffirm – but the core of it was Leavis's own advocacy of Lawrence after the 1930s. That Leavis's motives for 'taking up' Lawrence were not always exactly those of his disciples mattered little at the time: the important thing was the authority transferred to the author by the Master's patronage. Indeed, in my opinion, Leavis was attracted by only a selection of what was on offer in Lawrence, and the compound result is a subtle misreading. The tacit anger and the subversion in much of the actual work, the overturning not merely of societal but artistic norms – an iconoclasm which could nonetheless co-exist with a strong sense of craft – was more or less downplayed. This boosted the novelist/poet when perhaps he most needed it, but has in the end proved damaging to him. Indeed, such unacknowledged suppression of the full Lawrence culminated in subterranean rumblings and aftershocks of its own among the converted: Christina van Heyningen's refined distaste for some of his passages of rhetoric and hectoring (surely a part of his own rejection of bourgeois 'good taste') is on display in an essay here.

I think Leavis saw Lawrence as confirming some of his own dearly-

held preoccupations. For example, he believed passionately in a lost (but perhaps obliquely recoverable) 'Organic Society', a feudal unity of spirit and matter that once bound together the classes and occupations in Britain. This former harmony, industry, commercialism, and the debasement of language in the media and advertising, were progressively destroying.

Lawrence was indeed highly critical of industrial materialism and the values of production. For his part, he felt that industry and mechanisation had crept into the human organism itself, emphasizing the 'head' and withering the rest. Modern people had become effective cyborgs by ignoring their primal centres of instinct and emotion and connection with place. In doing so, they'd lost touch also with a kind of super-personal natural tide of feeling that should govern, he sensed, below consciousness. The result was a sickness, an inner rootlessness and alienation from self, responsible for the manic thinness of modern life.

Comparing the two, however, it's clear that their insights are not identical. Leavis's main focus is on society and its structures and is conservative, while Lawrence's is a diagnostic of the inner life, with perhaps a radical, but essentially spiritual, solution the only way out. Conversely, the implicit 'aristocracy of sensibility' Leavisitism and Practical Criticism are sometimes accused of fostering has little in common with the 'aristocracy of instinct' the later Lawrence, in his worst moments, embraced.

Again, while he advocated new accepting attitudes to sexuality, his outlook was essentially moral by its own lights. Indeed, potentially it involved nothing less than the moral regeneration of humankind. Lawrence's disgust at Bloomsbury's polymorphous permissiveness is evidence: he saw them as 'black beetles' copulating meaninglessly. For Lawrence, all such activities had to be of the whole man or woman, just as thought itself was 'a man in his wholeness wholly attending' (*Poems*, 673).

I think this emphasis on wholeness of response is something Leavis and his followers found instantly appealing, taught as they were by Matthew Arnold to see morality simply as posing the question 'how to live,' not as the imposition of abstract principles. Hence Leavis's rejection of philosophy, his conviction that true criticism and morality were virtually

the same thing, a – in Arnold's phrase – 'criticism of life'. But, once more, we see these aren't identical positions. Despite his suspicion of abstract reasoning, Leavis is nowhere about to fall back on instinct. And Lawrence could actually write: 'art is utterly dependent on philosophy: or if you prefer it, on a metaphysic' (quoted p.232).

Perhaps the comments above will seem in excess in a book review like this; however, I do think they help to clarify the place of Pietermaritzburg recollections like the following, from Francois Hugo, on page 67 of this volume: 'Christina often demanded to know whether students were in fact "feeling" the significance of the passage she was reading. She was insisting on a live response, not, as some students seemed to think, inviting a display of personal emotion.' Bill Bizley remembers this aspect rather less nostalgically: 'the imperative that reigned at the typical criticism session – "You feel this, don't you?" – eventually crudified literary judgment by reducing it to a moralizing polemic' (75).

This hints to us that Lawrence would have been poorly in tune not only with Leavisitism, but with a number of revivals he was due to suffer over the last century. All of them did, however, cement attitudes to his work in universities here and abroad. Between the 1950s and 1960s the *Lady Chatterley* censorship trial was to usher in the 'permissive society' – a place in which Bloomsbury would have felt perfectly at home, and of which Lawrence himself became more or less a symbol, as evidenced by the films by Ken Russell and others, with their trademark slow-motion eroticism. Then, at the end of that decade, the left wing pounced upon him as the iconic working-class novelist (overlooking his own politics, of course). For example, he was chosen as the first novelist to be studied at the then merely ajar Open University, which seemed entirely appropriate at the time. After so many 'causes', no wonder his legacy is presently shunted into a siding, having attracted so much excess baggage on route. Yet one hopes Bizley is right and Lawrence will eventually prove 'greater than the strategy that tended to be identified with him' (79).

This conspectus of the uses made of Lawrence over the years now has to turn definitely to South Africa, and our local cultural scene. It was once explained to me that local goths or punk rockers were not to be thought of as imitation Londoners, because the objects of their rebellion were quite different. In the same way, Lawrence did I think become a

different *symbol* locally to the way he functioned overseas. For some, I have no doubt, his respect for the innate personal power of ordinary working people had a politically conscientising effect. Certainly, for a writer like Bessie Head, Lawrence offered a model of how powerful themes could be explored among recognisable characters in familiar rural contexts: a highly clarifying essay by Mark Kinkead-Weekes firmly establishes this.

For others with environmental leanings, Lawrence's portrayal of the strength of non-human nature in *St. Mawr* and elsewhere provided an additional inspiration to engage with our own far less European, less domesticated spaces, just as Lawrence himself had similar encounters in Mexico and Australia. (In a comment on Thomas Hardy, quoted by Kinkead-Weekes on p. 130, Lawrence speaks of the 'vast unexplored morality of life itself, what we call the immorality of nature, [that] surrounds us in its eternal incomprehensibility'.)

This influence upon Africa was, as it turns out, a two-way exchange. Christopher Heywood gives here a revealing account of Lawrence's interest in 'bushman' art. Indeed, it's often forgotten that, like Paul Morel in *Sons and Lovers*, he was also a painter: one can at once see in his pictures how important this particular inspiration was. But it was no patronising glorification of 'the primitive' that drove him to celebrate San art. He saw it, indeed, as a highly advanced achievement. As Birkin, discussing an African sculpture, reveals to Gerald, who 'hated the sheer African thing': 'it is an awful pitch of culture, of a definite sort ... Pure culture in sensation, culture in the physical consciousness' (*Women in Love*, 79; quoted by Phelps, 242).

But the area most people associate Lawrence with is sex. In our highly repressive, puritanical, close-down-on Sundays environment of the sixties, Lawrence must have looked to some like a beacon of liberating light. Some would have found inspiring, too, his validation of powerful personal emotions, and of a vibrant and untrammelled response to all experience: his hope that man could 'learn what it is to be at one, in his mind and will, with the primal impulses that rise in him' (*Ibid.*, 130). And it's in these features one finds, I think, a peculiarly South African variant emerging. Indeed here we see Lawrence becoming, for certain people, a quasi-religious figure; certainly a messianic prophet and a model for personal identification, in a way that must have been rare outside his own



circle. It would be vain to deny some of this infiltrated certain quarters of academic life.

The story of Tom Smailes from UPE, who took his life in the 70s, remains one of the most fascinating untold chapters in this history. I say untold, since his colleagues Peter Bryant and John McDermot are understandably reserved in the short memoir they provide on p. 63. However, this seems to leave a minor gap of sorts in what this necessary book reveals and records. I knew of Smailes only from his clearly charismatic influence on students who transferred to Rhodes from UPE. That he was a compelling teacher and a mesmerising personality was evident enough. It seems also that he 'lived' Lawrence, adopted and acted out the Laurencean way, in a manner that deeply impressed them; how much this had to do with his tragic ending, though, others who knew him will have to assess. I for one certainly hope that one day they feel free to do so.

The seminal formal critical essays that follow the section of reminiscences have also to be taken as our own distinctly local contribution to a powerful debate. They include a particularly interesting article by Chris Thurman on how Guy Butler's own 'strange gods' stand up against Lawrence's; but the resistance to Lawrence at Rhodes is almost as interesting as his centrality elsewhere. Some of it stems from Butler himself: his distaste at any hint of 'evangelical' seriousness in the study of literature – any sign that it might in essence be a pseudo-religious pursuit – spilled over to include Leavis. Over several decades, it was only I who ever taught a Lawrence novel in a mainstream course; and Margot Beard who once fielded an elective. She reminds me that towards the end of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, Mellors thinks of emigrating to South Africa, a country which clearly has a symbolic resonance for him. Indeed, partly as a result of his friendship with the Juta family (Peter Merrington goes into this connection in an essay here) Lawrence himself projected a trip to Zululand. A pity it never took place, or South African literature might even have boasted a very interesting inclusion by him, one to match his forays in Australia and elsewhere, and perhaps, incidentally, to warm him in Butler's estimation in the process.

I know I have concentrated, perhaps unfairly, on the personal and biographical elements on display here, and neglected the more general

reader's interests. Indeed, there's far greater food for thought available—in all sorts of directions—than could easily be imagined in advance. Admittedly, old students of our venerable institutions will find much to remember and identify with in the reminiscences; but I would encourage anyone with an interest in the past and present of our cultural life to scavenge for what can be learned, of deeper significance, from this book, even if their acquaintance with Lawrence is rusty or fleeting. As a document to a deeply influential, combative, opinionated but passing world this collection has lasting value. And that passing world may just be English Departments as we've known them.

### References

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